

'HUMOUR IN DISGUISE': LANGUAGE AND CHARACTER
IN PHILIPPE DE RÉMI'S *JEHAN ET BLONDE*

Jehan et Blonde, composed towards the end of the thirteenth century by the legist, Philippe de Beaumanoir, later author of the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*, is a conventional tale of young love, triumphing through wit and intelligence over the claims of an official suitor. The traditional ascription of the romance to the closing years of the thirteenth century and the authorship of Beaumanoir has been called into question by B. Gicquel, who believes it was composed some time before 1242 by the legist's father, also called Philippe de Rémi.¹ The work celebrates the rise of its hero, Jehan, scion of a noble, but impoverished, French family, through the ranks of continental and English society to marriage with the daughter of the Earl of Oxford and the lordship of Dammartin. The traditional exile-and-return *schema* on which it is based is modified by the injection of a richly humorous cross-Channel rivalry between Jehan and the luckless *soupirant*, Gloucester, and by a witty play on courtly character types and situations.

The irony implicit in these fluctuations and role reversals has been described as a comic gaiety, attributable to the author's youthful exuberance.² However, earlier critics have made no attempt to extend this sentimental observation into an analysis of style, structure and pedagogic intent. The present study focuses on the two encounters between the hero and the Englishman (vv.2425-2890 and 3479-4514), which contain in microcosm the methods and features of Philippe de Rémi's *persiflage*. It aims to reveal that humour is an essential part of the thematic fabric of the work, and a key to the reassessment of the poet's narrative technique.

Humour and didacticism are complementary. Ironic subversion or skilful adaptation of romance conventions, far from having a distracting effect, focus the work's moral impact. Jehan's meeting with Gloucester serves to reinforce the extent of his achievements which realize the dreams of an audience of lesser nobles:

Icist dont je ce conte fas
... preceus estre ne vost pas,
Ains ala en estrange terre
Pour preu et pour honnour conquerre.
Honneur cacha, a honneur vint.
Or vous dirai comment ch'avint. (vv.43-48)

The Englishman himself, tainted with fabliau characteristics, takes his place in a cautionary tale of aristocratic failure.

The central comic moment of the work is provided by the meeting of Jehan and Gloucester on the road to Oxford (vv.2425-2890), where the Frenchman intends to elope with his beloved in accordance with a promise made a year earlier, whilst his companion anticipates the celebration of his

arranged marriage with the same woman. The scene is based on a series of oppositions, at the heart of which lies the comic interaction of the wily hero and the dim-witted aristocrat, who speaks a seriously-flawed French. Jehan conceals his identity by adopting the double-edged disguise of a fool and a merchant, mocking his opponent and obliquely indicating his plan to escape with Blonde through a sequence of apparently meaningless riddles. When the Englishman offers to buy Jehan's horse, the hero tells him that he must pay the price demanded, however high (vv.2645-62). The unfortunate Gloucester, having failed to bring a cape with him, is next drenched by a sudden shower and Jehan declares that, for his part, he would never travel without his 'house' (vv.2673-94). Shortly afterwards, the Earl fails to test the depth of a river, but riding headlong into it, is knocked from his horse by the force of the current. Jehan, who successfully negotiates the stretch of water, remarks that on every journey he takes his own 'bridge' with him (vv.2711-88). Gloucester is highly entertained by the ludicrous advice of the 'bone sote entere' (v.2660) and begs him to remain with the party, as Jehan takes his leave outside Oxford. Using the same enigmatic language, the hero replies that he is unable to continue with them, as he must check a trap he set for a sparrowhawk the previous year (vv.2809-28). These *devinailles* (referring respectively to the horse on which Blonde is to flee with her lover and which is, therefore, priceless; a cloak to keep out the elements; a retainer sent ahead to test the depth of the water; the love Jehan feels for Blonde and the heroine herself) derive from a rich secular tradition of deception through puzzling language, in which a poor suitor allows his wealthy rival to mock him before carrying his beloved away as foretold in his jests. In the *Romance of Horn*, the exiled hero returns to Brittany and joins his adversaries, Wikele and Modin, as they make their way to the marriage ceremony which will unite Modin and Horn's mistress, Rigmel. Horn is disguised as a pilgrim, but reveals his identity through metaphor, claiming to have been employed as a fisherman by a noble lord several years previously and to have returned to check that the net he set then has no fish entangled in it; if it remains as he left it, he will carry it away. As in *Jehan et Blonde*, the net is identified with the character and constancy of the lady.³ Rigmel's suspicions as to the true identity of the traveller, aroused by the hero's pun on the horn from which she serves him wine and his dropping of a ring she had given him as a token of her love into the goblet, are confirmed by his parable of the goshawk which he has returned to claim, providing he finds it intact (vv.4164-4308). Examples of the poor but cunning suitor abound in folktale and include the story of 'Bailie Lunnain'.⁴ It tells of a Highlander, who falls in love with the daughter of the Lord Mayor of London and determines to marry her, and of his journey with his Saxon rival whom he mocks with clever language. Jehan's victory, like that of his counterparts, is grounded in speech; his words become a substitute for action, allowing him to score intellectual points over his opponent. The thrusting, dynamic heroism of

the Arthurian protagonist gives way in *Jehan et Blonde* to a devious victory, in which the gifts of the mind replace deeds of prowess. Jehan's supremacy, reflected in these verbal tactics, is reaffirmed in the armed battle which follows Gloucester's discovery of Blonde's disappearance (vv.4029-4470). With the aid of his *valet*, Robinet, and the captain and crew of the ship which has brought him to England, the French noble overcomes Gloucester and his men. However this martial activity is essentially a reprise of the earlier battle of wits, which ironically proves to be the determining conflict.

It is the downfall of Gloucester, the mocker mocked, which provides a humorous focus in the first confrontation. Arrogant and foolish, the Earl fails to read the signals which point to Jehan's amorous triumph and foretell his elopement, retaining only the surface meaning of the hero's words. The ridicule encouraged by his limited viewpoint becomes self-condemnation and the stupidity he ascribes to the hero is transferred by the reader to the Earl himself:

'Compainons, avas vous oïs
Toute le melor sot Francis
Que vous peüsiés mais garder.' (vv.2697-99)

The irony of the apparent *nice* triumphing over the crowing fool is underlined by counterpointing the veiled wittiness of Jehan's language with the clumsy blundering of Gloucester's French. Philippe renews the trickster convention by combining it with traditional gallic mockery of the Englishman's linguistic incompetence. The *baragouin* of humorous convention is depicted in such works as the thirteenth-century *Pais aus Anglois*, a satirical account of a council held by Henry III to discuss with his barons plans for the recovery of Normandy, and the fabliau *Des Deux Anglois et de l'anel*, in which misunderstanding and humour arise from an English character's twisting of the word *aignel* (lamb) to *anel* (young donkey).⁵ In the courtly, satirical and fabliau works the infinitive frequently replaces conjugated verbs, whilst those which do modify take a uniform 'a' ending in most tenses. Mistakes in gender and agreement are marked, as is aphaeresis. In addition, mispronunciation by Gloucester leads to punning in the transformation of 'pucelle' into 'porcel' (pig) (v.2837). The absence of 's' changes inoffensive 'pescheor' into the dubious 'pecheor' (v.3131). Specifically English elements include 'de' (the) in the construction 'par de foi' (v.2685) and 'nai' (v.2658). The form 'Franchis' (v.2685) for *français* similarly appears to be based on the English. Speech parody here functions not as a satire on the English nation as a whole but as a characterizational technique intended to detract from the authority and prestige of an aristocrat, who speaks the imperfect language of the unrefined. His lower-class idiom reflects the baseness of a vengeful and selfish character, lacking the wit and agility of a tutored mind. The contradiction between rank and speech complicates the network of inversions which spans the scene and questions the neat courtly equation between rank and virtue.

A technique of mockery is adapted to distinguish between the sympathetic English and those hostile to the hero's cause. Gloucester and his men speak the same fractured jargon, whilst Oxford and his entourage speak a perfect French, only slightly marred by an English accent. 'Li quens d'Osefort', we are told, '... le Francois seut bien entendre,/ En France eut esté pour aprendre' (vv.131-32). Philippe's discriminating portraits of his neighbours across the Channel contrast with the hostile depiction of the nation in the fifteenth-century *Jehan de Paris*, in which the young King of France disguises himself as a Parisian bourgeois to dupe the King of England, his older rival for the Spanish princess. In a strategy recalling that of Philippe de Rémi's hero, Jehan de Paris mocks his companion through three riddles based on houses, bridges and a duck (which replaces the sparrowhawk in the earlier narrative).⁶ The Hundred-Years War has deepened and reinforced the incipient ill-will of the first work, turning bantering rivalry into corrosive antagonism.

Allusions to the Tristan and Renart stories enrich Philippe's depiction of Gloucester, by reinforcing the incongruous coexistence of the base and high-born in his character. Jehan's hoodwinking of his travelling companion through the adoption of a mode of speech based on confusing metaphor recalls in structure, language and characterization elements of the *Renart teinturier* section of Branch Ib of the *Roman de Renart*.⁷ Renart, having fallen into a vat of yellow dye meets his arch-enemy, Isengrin, and, realizing that his new colour will screen his identity from the wolf, completes his transformation by adopting the burlesque French of an Anglo-Norman *jongleur*. Philippe exploits the humorous potential of the original episode by duplicating the technique of comic speech patterns. Jehan, the Renart figure, masking his intelligence beneath his fool disguise, speaks in a coded language which echoes the apparent foolishness of the rhymester, whilst to Gloucester fall the tortured syntax and grammatical inaccuracies of Renart's parody French, here no longer a clever pretence but an index of a hesitant and unexceptional intelligence. Gloucester takes on the function of Isengrin in this episode, but after his defeat in battle by Jehan, it is through assimilation to Renart that Philippe mocks him. In his pique at having been robbed of his heiress, Gloucester claims to have had no desire to wed her, recalling the feigned indifference of Renart when prevented from enjoying his blackberries:

Aussi n'eut des meures Renars:
 Quant failli eut de toutes pars
 Et il vit nule n'en avroit,
 Dont dist que cure n'en avoit (vv. 4499-4502)

These implied and explicit allusions to the animal epic subvert the image of the Earl as an example of courtly refinement and culture. Through dialogue two diametrically opposed characters are directly confronted in a play-off of trickster against fool.

The oblique truth of Jehan's statements has its counterpart in the cunning imagery employed by the hero in the *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*.⁸ Tristan gains entrance to Mark's palace, disguised as a fool, and describes his early life and his relationship with Iseult in a crazy litany (vv.271-74 and 301-310). Features of the episode – the donning of a fisherman's clothes, the changes in physical appearance through the cutting of the hair and the dyeing of the face, and the altering of the voice (vv.197-220) – are echoed in the disguise adopted by Robinet to pass unrecognized through a group of Gloucester's men. He plays the invalid, leaning on a stick (v.3633), walking with a limp (vv.3647-49), one eye closed and his voice apparently hoarse with fever (vv.3650-51), even succeeding in persuading the Earl to give him alms (vv.3661-65). By transferring the actions of a noble to a low-born character, Philippe suggests a deeper moral exchange; the ability of the humbly born but worthy man to imitate the courtly behaviour of his superior. The counterfeit madness and ambiguous speech of Tristan parallel the techniques of Philippe's own hero, but in his use of the Tristan tale as in that of Renart, Philippe reveals the variety which he combines with imitation as he adapts the plot *schema*, psychological and emotional traits to his own narrative and admonitory aims.

The exchange between Jehan and Gloucester undermines the essential function of language, which is to communicate. This complex interplay of sense and nonsense is completed in the corpus of Philippe's work by a number of pure nonsense poems or *fatrasies* which, within the strict regularity imposed by metre and rhyme, link idea with idea in absurd succession. The rules of logic, syntax and grammar break down as subject and predicate are at best tenuously linked.⁹ In the *Seconde Fatrasie*, a series of place names is infused with comic energy as Beaumanoir depicts French towns engaged in human activity:

A tant vint je ne sai quoi
 Qui Calais et Saint Omer
 Prist et mist en un espoi,
 Si les a fait reculer
 Deseur le Mont saint Eloi. (vv 7-11)

In Gloucester's jargon, grammatical and syntactical structures are distorted but retain a resemblance to accepted patterns of speech; indeed the humour derives from recognition of the degree of divergence between the Englishman's warped French and the correct pattern which is dimly perceived behind it. Jehan's language, in contrast to the unconscious inaccuracy of that of Gloucester, deliberately obscures meaning whilst preserving the logic of grammar.

Intimately connected with the creation of humour is the use of masks by characters. Both Jehan in his role as fool and Robinet in his invalid disguise take on the function of the author, creating new personalities and shaping the response of the internal audience of the romance. Like the

senefiance of the *roman* itself, which is drawn by the reader from events, the meaning of Jehan's riddles lies hidden. In the hero's puzzles Philippe uses *mise en abyme* to throw into relief the illusory nature of his narrative world. The hero's predictions are realized in his escape with Blonde, yet this 'real' event, like its allegorical prefiguring, remains part of an imagined universe. The poet uses one fiction to focus attention on another. By such self-conscious allusion to the act of creation, Philippe invites admiration for the elaborate pretence he has conceived and maintains.

There is no rigid compartmentalization in the two encounters between the rival suitors but a fluid blending of comic registers, ranging from the cerebral to the fabliauesque, the whole unified by an underplay of ironic commentary expressed in revealing juxtapositions, inverted echoes and patterns of conflicting action and reaction. The vitality of Philippe de Rémi's Gloucester figure derives from the poet's skilful interweave of conventions, which range from the boorish jealousy of the lyric '*mal-marié*', to the dull mind and unrefined speech of the satire Englishman and the threatened *cocuage* of the fabliau husband. Philippe enriches his character by incorporating allusions which cut across the barriers of genre.

Gloucester is subject to physical humour in the form of near-drowning and ignominiously toppling from his horse in battle. His greater wealth and superior weapons are insufficient to prevent him from being knocked over his horse's croup to land head-first with a neck-wrenching thud (vv.4169-81). The rough-and-tumble of physical discomfiture underlines the poet's moral point of a noble unworthy, by his flawed character, to occupy his exalted social position and soon to be usurped as *prétendant* to Oxford's daughter by a man of lesser rank.

Robinet's deception of Gloucester occupies a middle ground between the cunning adoption of disguise by fabliaux clerics to further their amorous intrigues and the superior cunning of Jehan who disorients with words. The emotional triangle of Gloucester, Jehan and Blonde exploits the humorous potential of the deceived husband and the unloving wife in a courtly framework. Faced with the prospect of marrying Gloucester, Blonde persuades her unwitting father to delay the wedding, thus giving her absent lover time to return and carry her off (vv.2312-78). Her ability to fool the Earl, her father, suggests a craftiness which might well have been put to less moral ends had she been forced into a loveless marriage with Gloucester. Fortunately, this suggested menace is never realized and the possibility of domestic disaster is averted by her union with Jehan.

Behind humour in *Jehan et Blonde* lies a network of binary oppositions, at the hub of which is the Earl of Gloucester. His relative *déchéance* which results in his emerging from events with rank and wealth intact but pride severely wounded counterpoints the hero's social elevation. The Englishman's character preserves an essential tension between wealth and moral poverty which reveals that Philippe de Rémi's aim is not to subvert but to infuse the figure with a teasing ambivalence. The plot demands a

powerful rival against whom the hero's prowess and mental agility might be tested. In Gloucester, the honourable, which in courtly tradition is synonymous with the aristocratic, is rent by imperfection and weakness. The poet renews the type of the heroic nobleman by stripping the Earl of his moral superiority. The character's status continues to command respect but he does nothing to earn his privileges. Beneath this enigmatic creation lies the author's desire for a flexible social framework which would recognize natural worth as well as inherited status. The ignominy of an aristocrat's defeat by a noble of lesser rank is intensified by the involvement of commoners in the victory and the transference of courtly traits to the captain and his men (vv.3907, 4023-28, 4085-89), whilst characterizing Gloucester's band as cowardly and *vilain* (vv.4073-75, 4307). 'Car il n'i a point de frapaille./ Vint bacelers jone et fort sont' (vv.3904-05), declares the poet of the ship's crew. Jehan, in contrast, lashes at one of the Earl's men with vitriolic scorn:

... 'Outre, glouton!
Trop par eüs le cure vilain
Quant a m'amie meïs main.' (vv.4054-56)

Overarching the contrast between the honourable and the unworthy, the low-ranking and highly placed is the patriotic opposition between the wise Frenchman and the naive Englishman. This dislocation of traditional views should not be interpreted as a plea for radical change and the disintegration of class barriers; the poet countenances social progression within strict limits. Only the nobly born are permitted to gain the highest honours, those who are of lesser rank must content themselves with positions of authority in their master's household (vv.6119-30). Philippe exploits the exchange of characteristics for its ironic quality and the mockery it permits of an unexceptional and arrogant aristocrat. The author delights in the disappointment of expectation as he introduces the Wheel of Fortune motif and the uncertainty it implies in the development of character and situation. The incongruity of noble commoners and base aristocrats is used for its ludic not its propaganda qualities.

The witty manipulation of lexis, metaphor, proverb, tense and verbal mood reinforces episodic comedy. Focused humour may be dependent on a single word which colours and controls response. The incongruous attribution of courtly epithets and the deviation from moral norms suggested by the language of *vilanie* in the battle episode fall within this group. Popular sayings may be used to create a dramatically ironic framework which anticipates disaster or victory. The subjunctive, implying the author's uncertainty about the outcome of events, heightens suspense and fosters the illusion of an autonomous universe outwith the control of the narrator. In the following example, the dread that Jehan might be too late to save his mistress, expressed in the double use of the subjunctive (vv.2417, 2422) and a maxim (v.2418) is temporarily allayed by the narrator's confidence in the hero's intelligence:

Or gart Jehans qu'il ne demeure!
 Car on pert assés en peu d'eure.
 Se trop demeure, il avra perte
 Qui au cuer li sera aperte,
 De grant duel avra le cuer point.
 Bien se gart s'il ne vient a point!
 Mais je le connois a si sage
 Qu'il eskieura ce damage. (vv.2417-24)

The romance's *senefiance* derives in part from a shaping humour and oblique wit which temper the overt moralizing of the prologue and epilogue where the hero is presented first as a model for action and later as the embodiment of wealth, marital and social stability. The didactic aim of the work, which functions as a spur to, and idealized reflection of, matrimonial and territorial ambitions, is served by a refracting humour which momentarily disturbs the ideal image before being subsumed in the harmony and order of the courtly world.

Humour throws into relief the imperfections of Philippe de Rémi's protagonists, and indicates directions for reform and improvement. In addition it creates the ironic distance essential to a rational interpretation of the poet's message to his audience. The comic quality is both tonal and textural, scanning emotional development and narrative progression; it imposes rhythm and pattern and bestows witty order on motifs. The humour arising from subtle shifts in emphasis is aimed at a sophisticated audience, appreciative of the play of repetitions and reversals which informs the work and stamps the poet's distinctive mark on romance *topoi*.

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Notes

1. All references to *Jehan et Blonde* are taken from the second volume of the *Œuvres poétiques de Philippe de Rémi, sire de Beaumanoir*, edited by H. Suchier, SATF (Paris, 1884-85), reprinted Johnson Reprint Corporation (New York, 1966). Gicquel's challenge, entitled 'Le *Jehan et Blonde* de Philippe de Rémi peut-il être une source du Willehalm von Orlens?', is to be found in *Romania*, 102 (1981), 306-23. For a fuller review of the authorship debate, see my thesis (University of Hull, 1985) 'Philippe de Rémi's *La Manekine* and *Jehan et Blonde*. A Study of Form and Meaning in Two Thirteenth-Century Old French Verse Romances'.

2. See, for example, J. Longnon in his translation of *Jehan et Blonde. Roman du XIII^e siècle*, Collection Médiévale, Les Romans Courtois, 2 (Paris, 1971), Introduction, p.v.

3. *The Romance of Horn*, edited by M. K. Pope and T. B. W. Reid, Anglo-Norman Texts, IX-X and XII-XIII, 2 vols (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1955 and 1964), I, vv.4004-81.

4. The Scottish tale is contained in *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, orally collected with a translation by J. F. Campbell, 4 vols (London, 1890), I, 17b, pp.289-96. This literary and folk tradition is adapted to a moralizing context in three versions from the *Gesta Romanorum*, included by Suchier in his edition of Philippe de Rémi's work (I, 319-54). Here the story becomes the basis for a meditation on the Christian's progress through life and the role of the sacraments

5. *La Pais aus Englois* is edited by E. Faral in *Mimes français du XIII^e siècle. Textes, notices et glossaire* (Paris, 1910), reprinted Slatkine Reprints (Geneva, 1973), pp.31-47. The fabliau is contained in the *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles*,

edited by A. de Montaiglon and G. Raynaud, Librairie des Bibliophiles, 6 vols (Paris, 1872-1890), II, 178-82.

6. *Le Roman de Jehan de Paris*, edited by E. Wickersheimer, SATF (Paris, 1923), pp.38-44.

7. *Le Roman de Renart*, edited by M. Roques, CFMA, 6 vols (Paris, 1957-63), I, vv.2321-3256.

8. Edited by E. Hoepffner, second edition (Strasburg, 1943).

9. For the text of the *fatrasies*, see Suchier, II, 273-84 and 305-10. On the techniques and characteristics of the form, consult P. Zumthor, E. G. Hessing and R. Vijlbrief, 'Essai d'analyse des procédés fatrasiques', *Romania*, 84 (1963), 145-70. It is interesting to note that the authorship of this group, unlike that of *Jehan et Blonde*, to which it is linked by certain stylistic and thematic traits, has never been subjected to doubt, critics continuing to assign the *fatrasies* to Philippe de Beaumanoir.